

Roses by EmeraldTulip

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Coming of Age, El making peace with her past (it's gotta happen I mean come on), Future Fic, Gen, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Will has Powers, a character study that turned into a story, and el is helping him through her own experiences, and like super background byeler bc I can't resist, but it's more like will is coming to terms with his identity, don't worry it's a death you'll be happy about, oh also really briefly mentioned past mileven, the jane vs el debate is involved here

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Will Byers & Eleven

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Summary:

Jane Ives is who she was supposed to be.

011 is what Papa made her to be; what the men in the white coats called her. 011 was a pawn, a soldier.

Eleven is the girl who found her place with friends and allies, who found a home (however briefly) for the first time in twelve years.

Jane—just Jane—is what her sister called her; the name she offered to become something other than a number.

Jane Hopper is the name on the paper in Dad's house, carefully

placed in a drawer.

El is her choice.

(Or: Kali shows her flowers and concrete.)

Roses

Author's Note:

this takes place four years after the events of season 2 and mostly focuses on how will and el's connection might develop based on their shared traumas. it mentions vague events that indicate an imaginary "season 3" in which a lot happens, but the most relevant point is that will goes missing for four days until they find him in the abandoned lab.

it also deals with an idea i have that after chicago el might have a difficult time coming to terms with the fact that she attacked multiple innocent people and almost killed a man while with kali and thus creates a sort of psychological disconnect between "eleven" and "jane". on top of that there's her identity as "011", permanently marked on her by brenner. she's got a lot of guilt to deal with, and a lot of anger. and will shares a lot of that burden, while their friends and parents don't know how to help but want to.

idea was kickstarted by the shakespeare quote, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

enjoy, everyone!

Eleven sometimes thinks about how lucky she is. She escaped the prison she had been in, she found a real father, real friends, the start of a real life. She lived.

But then she thinks about Jane.

She thinks about how unlucky Jane Ives was, the Jane Ives who is officially dead in the eyes of the government, the Jane Ives who died at the hands of Papa. She thinks of how unlucky Momma is, Momma whose child died. Momma whose child found her all those years later, but who no longer was Jane Ives.

She thinks about how her life might have been like if Momma hadn't done the experiments, if Papa hadn't taken her to the Rainbow Room, if she had gone home on her birthday and grown up and put on clothes and gone to school and been called Jane Ives.

She thinks it would be a lot different.

She tells Will about Papa, because she thinks he might understand.

And he does, sort of, and she knows because his face twists and he says, "Yeah. Me, too." He offers her his hand, and she pushes up his sleeve.

And she doesn't know *how* and she doesn't know *when* but she doesn't think she needs to ask any of that at the moment. Instead, she holds out her own arm and yanks up her own sleeve and says, "011." Not Eleven. 011.

Will is quiet for a moment and then he turns his hand and links their fingers so their numbers are pressed together. "After the Mind Flayer came back—when we were all in the lab and you couldn't find me. *He* was there. Brenner. He had me for that whole time, the whole four days, and he did this to me."

And it makes sense to her because they found him tied to an operating table in the locked-down east wing four days after he went missing for the second time.

Why? she asks him. *Why didn't you say?*

I wanted to wait until we were alone. I needed to tell you. "I'm sorry."

She pushes closer to him, her free hand curling against his collarbone and her head dipping low to hear his heartbeat. He's alive. "Don't be. I understand."

She feels him shake his head. "But I'm still Will, even with this. I don't think you're 011," he tells her.

"No?" she asks, pressing her lips into a line, and he sighs, chest rising and falling once slowly before he shakes his head again. "Jane?"

He breathes. “Your name is Jane Hopper, but I don’t think you’re Jane, either.”

She lifts her head to meet his gaze. “So... who?”

He looks at her and then looks away, staring disconnectedly at the wall. “I think you’re... El.”

And friends don’t lie, so that must be the truth.

Mike tells her that she needs to choose what she wants. That El needs to make her own decisions, and that he can’t do that for her. He can’t, Dad can’t, Will can’t. No one but her.

Some of that is easy: she chooses her friends. She chooses to apologize to Max, to hug Lucas and Dustin and Joyce again, to talk to Nancy and Jonathan and Steve (at least before they leave for school), to read more with her Dad. She chooses to stay with Will as often as she can, to grip his hand tightly and talk until the sun sets and then until it rises. She chooses to apologize to Mike, because she can’t be who or what he wants her to be.

And that seems easy. Compared to defeating the Mind Flayer, compared to grappling with the knowledge that Papa is still out there... it’s easy.

But choosing Jane isn’t, maybe because El doesn’t want her.

Sometimes she’s gone out of her own head and when she finally wakes up, Jane has already done her work.

El cries at night, quietly and under the covers as to not wake Dad up, as she tries desperately to reassemble the broken pieces Jane left behind. She wears long sleeves and steals Joyce’s makeup to hide the marks.

Eleven envies Jane, thinks about how she is so lucky that only El feels the sting of cuts and bruises in the aftermath. Jane is the one who shatters glass and fractures wood, Jane is the one who is dangerous, but El is the one left with the scars from it.

Will is wrong: she *is* Jane, even if she really isn't. She tells him as much, showing him her shaking hand.

He takes both her hands in his, his skin cold like it has been since they were twelve, both their numbers dark against pale wrists. "You did this?"

She shakes her head, violently, curls flying as she accidentally knocks a book off the shelf when she looks at it. "Not me. Jane."

Will sits back, still holding her hands. Confusion is etched across his face—because of course he knows her legal name. "El. What do you mean? Who... who's Jane?"

Not for the first time, she curses her limited vocabulary. Years of extra lessons and a year of school haven't prepared her enough for this. "Jane is... me, but not *me*." Tears are running down her face and she's not sure when that started, but the world is blurring around the edges. "She's in my head and I can't get her *out*."

Will's face shutters slightly at that, and she knows why: even now, almost four years after his possession, the Upside Down hasn't left Will. The monster is still in his head—she sees it all around him in the shadows as they bend, the leaves as they die, the people as they move away, the static as it crackles, the objects as they move. Will is like her but isn't like her, he can only do these things because of the creature in his brain.

But the monster isn't like Jane.

"Sometimes I remember, mostly I don't," she explains, sniffing, gesturing to the disarrayed room they're sitting in. "But I wake up and I know that Jane did all of this. Since Chicago."

El told Will about Kali and Chicago almost a year ago, explained how much sway she had let Kali hold over her. How she had almost killed that man. How she had seen Papa and hurt people and been shot at. The way she had been Jane to her sister, and how much she missed her no matter how terrible she felt about it.

"Could Kali help you?" he asks her now. And it's been four years,

but...

She looks up, startled. "Maybe. But she isn't here."

"No," he agrees. "But we could go there."

They leave in the dead of night, tossing their bags into the car Dr. Owens had given them as what he called a "settlement". An apology, El guesses, for what the lab did to them. They don't really use it, but now they're grateful they have it.

They talked about telling their friends about their plans. But they didn't, because Lucas would be angry, Dustin would be scared, Max would underestimate the stakes, and Mike would put himself in danger for them. Their parents are no better.

As Will turns the key with fumbling fingers and pulls out of the driveway, El takes his hand. They're both shaking with nerves—from the fear of being caught, from the guilt of running away—but she sends a pulse of comfort through their link and feels him send one back.

She thinks about the note they'd left on Joyce's kitchen table, in Will's distinct handwriting: *We're safe. We'll be home soon.* She thinks about the way she had stopped him from writing *I'm sorry*. She thinks about how her hand had shaken as she signed *El* at the bottom under Will's name, remembering not to write a *J* at the last second. She thinks about the drawing they had left right under it—one Will had sketched in blacks and grays and browns and purples as they closed their eyes and sent out a wave, searching—of a girl with dark eyes and long purple hair and a black jacket. The caption written in El's own careful print: *008. She called me Jane.*

They also recorded a message on the supercom and set it to send in the morning.

El doesn't know why Will does it to himself.

She's reclined the passenger's seat as far as it will go, eyes closed, as

Will keeps driving down the barely lit highway. A sudden jolt of white noise in her head catapults her to full consciousness, but she doesn't open her eyes. She doesn't open her eyes because she feels shadowy tendrils snaking around the radio, and she knows that it's Will and not the monster.

Back home, Joyce isn't awake yet, she knows, and neither is Dad. But something on the radio tells her that *someone* is, and that someone heard their message.

"No no no no please no..."

The air shifts, and in one moment Will's mind is her own and she hears him say, *Mike*.

"Will," she says, and the shadows drop suddenly. The radio turns off. She opens her eyes. "Stop."

"I'm sorry," he replies, staring resolutely in front of him, wiping a hand under his nose. His finger comes away red. "I'm sorry."

She shakes her head. "It's okay. You needed to make sure he knew. I know."

"I'm sorry," he says again, and all she can do is take his hand—his right in her left—and miss the way his number usually burns into hers.

"Kali?" she calls as she walks down an unfamiliar Chicago street, Will trailing behind. She tries to remember the other names, the other people she had met, but it feels like so long ago. "Kali?"

The concrete flickers under the feet, suddenly, and then whirls until they're no longer standing in an alleyway at night. Grass sprouts on the ground and the sky lightens until they can see the sun coming up on the horizon. The buildings disappear and are replaced with hills. They're somewhere beautiful.

"Whoa," Will mutters behind her, and she remembers how she had felt when she saw the butterfly—this is more than just a bug.

“Jane?” a voice says, and then Kali is there, right *there*. But she isn’t Jane. Can’t turn into her again.

But. “It’s me,” she says. “Jane. But I’m El. That’s the problem.” She feels Will come up a little closer behind her, enough so that she can feel his pulse.

Kali notices—she notices everything, El thinks. “Who is he?”

“Will,” she answers. “My brother.” And she says it without thinking, but it’s true—they don’t live together and don’t share parents (yet, anyway), but Will is a sibling to her. And then she remembers the number. “Yours, too.” She holds out her arm and Will does the same.

Kali looks at them. “I thought you were gone.”

“I wasn’t sure,” she replies. She glances at Will, hesitant.

Will understands, looks at Kali. “We need your help,” he says. “El needs your help.”

They do it by Kali’s rules, not that either of them like it. Kali doesn’t falter once, to her credit, and calls her El.

She brings El back to that paradise every day—sometimes with Will, sometimes without. El doesn’t even realize she’s counting the days again until she realizes, *day eighteen*. They’ve been gone for over two weeks.

We can’t stay here forever, Will says to her.

I know, she replies.

Kali grows roses in the meadow with a wave of her hand. El watches the petals unfurl and darken.

El gingerly touches one, unsurprised when it flickers out of existence for a moment. “Petals. Pretty.”

“And the thorns?” Kali prompts.

El looks at them. “Dangerous.”

“Do you know what these are?” Kali asks.

“Roses,” El answers.

Kali smiles slightly. “Yes. But tell me, what are they *really*?” The vision fades out for a second.

“Pretend.” *Lies. Friends don’t lie.*

“Exactly, Jane.” Kali looks at her expectantly, and El doesn’t know what she wants. Doesn’t know why she’s suddenly calling her Jane again.

“I don’t understand,” she confesses.

Kali just stares at her. “The roses, Jane. They are like you.”

And then it sinks in: the flowers, the name. Kali’s images, the pretty and horrifying things she makes, aren’t real. It’s beautiful, but it’s fake. The paradise doesn’t exist.

Jane is pretty and dangerous and fake. Jane has no real power.

The vision strips itself away until all El can see is Kali, sitting, hand on the pavement. Strong and solid and oh so real.

“This, El,” she says, tapping the concrete. “This is you.”

They stop in Lafayette on the way back home. They don’t need to, but halfway back to Hawkins the car starts to shake from the pressure of having two on-edge telekinetics inside and El decides to call it a day.

They book a hotel room, not at all protesting when they are told there are only rooms with one bed left. Will instead whispers in the manager’s ear, wisps of black smoke trickling from his lips, and persuades him not to write them down on the register. (And if he gets them a fifty-percent discount, well, no one has to know.)

They lie in the darkness, sides pressed together because that's the only way they can ward off the evil anymore. Will folds the shadows around them, cocooning them in a shield in case anything *does* happen. Which it shouldn't.

What do you think they'll do? he asks her. *When we get back. What will they do?*

She squeezes his hand. *I don't know.*

They only run into trouble once on the way back from there—if it can even be considered that—when they stop at a gas station and something that is undoubtedly an Upside-Down escapee screeches at them. But they turn around and it's gone, and they've only caught a glimpse.

For all their powers, it's good the haven't turned into huge dark energy magnets. That would suck.

Nevertheless, El keeps a stronger shield up around them for an hour as Will drives, knuckles white on the steering wheel. Then she crawls into the backseat and sleeps, bloody tissue clenched in her fist.

She only wakes when Will pulls into his driveway and climbs out. She lies there for a moment longer, basking in the effects of lingering sleep, but then she hears a noise of collision and sits up.

"You can't just do that," Mike says quietly, clutching Will's shoulders before pulling him into a hug. "You can't... you can't do that to us. To *me*."

El watches Max's face appear in the Byers' window. The redhead smiles and disappears, and El sends out her mind to find what she really already expected: everyone is inside, waiting for their return. They spill out onto the porch; Joyce looking haggard, Max looking excited, Dustin and Lucas looking sleepy, and her Dad, relief and disappointment warring on his face. Mike is still crushing Will in a bruising embrace.

My choice. I chose this.

With her thought, she feels Jane press against the confines of her brain, but she just thinks, *not real*, and forces it down.

She thinks it isn't a dream, but even if it is she knows it's real. Will stays close, and she feels his shadows circling.

"011," Papa says, and she and Will whirl.

He's standing there, suit impeccable, face paler than she ever remembers it being.

"No more," she tells him. "No more."

His lips spread into a thin smile. "I made you, 011." He looks at Will. "Him, too. It's been too long, for both of you, and you're sick. Do you feel it?"

"No." She doesn't. She feels the blood under her nose, the energy in her fingertips, the six years that separate her from the lab, the five years in freedom that have let her survive to age seventeen, and the something that festers deep inside her heart—it feels like anger. But it isn't sickness.

"You know it's true, 011," he insists. "You know that there is something inside that needs to be fixed, and that only I can help you. You can come back to me. Both of you."

And suddenly her mouth can't move because she understands what he means but doesn't know how to tell him that she doesn't need him. It's *her* choice, it's *Will's* choice, and they don't need fixing. They don't need to fill the voids trauma has left with pointless missions, they don't have to mindlessly obey destructive orders like Papa used to make her.

But she can't say it.

Will does it for her. His eyes flare and his hands twitch, blood collects on his upper lip, and then the shadows bend until Papa is almost invisible, trapped in a ghostly shell.

"You heard her," Will says—does he shout? El can't tell. "*No more.*"

She steps forward to stand by his side, hears his concession to her in her head. *It's your choice, El. If you want to do it, do it. If you don't, I'll let him go.*

"011, you don't have to do this," Papa—Brenner—says. His voice is deceptively calm, but El reaches out and feels rather than hears his fear. It rattles around in her chest, rasps out when she breathes. Hears him think, even as he says it, "*You can't.*"

Jane is pretty and dangerous and fake. Jane has no real power. 011 has even less. That's what Brenner is banking on.

But Eleven isn't Jane. Isn't 011.

"Yes," she says and she feels the strength and solidity and the *reality* of it all. "I can."

Jane Elizabeth Byers-Hopper graduates from Hawkins High School in the summer of 1989. The diploma goes in the new drawer—the drawer her adoption papers are in, along with her legal name change and the marriage certificate between James Hopper and Joyce Byers—the one that now resides in the Byers-Hopper residence, the one that belongs to her parents. William Byers puts his diploma in, too.

Joyce Byers-Hopper organizes the party, Jim Hopper cries (a lot), and Jonathan Byers comes home to take photos of his new little sister and same-old little brother. Nancy comes back to watch Mike graduate but Steve can't make it so he calls instead. Lucas, Dustin, and Max pool their money to get Will new paints and El a skateboard, which Max promises to help her with. Will and El buy everyone CDs from the new music store in town. Mike gets them all flowers (he's got a job at the florist's), and El smiles wryly when she notices the red and white roses in hers.

It's that night that Will tells her something—two things. Or one and a half.

You look happy, he tells her, him sandwiched between Mike and a couch cushion, her squished against Lucas' arm by Max, who's play-fighting with Dustin. Their parents, Jonathan, and Nancy are

laughing in the kitchen. *You look more like you than you ever have before.*

Thank you, El replies, raising an eyebrow at him from across the room. *Everything okay?* Because she can feel his mind racing and it's kind of giving her a headache.

I need to tell you something, he says, and she waits. *I, um. Friends don't lie, and so...* He hesitates, and she knows.

She doesn't need to hear him say it, because she already knows, even if he can't tell her yet. *Will. Hey.* She remembers Kali, and the roses, and the shadows, and Jane. *You just have to be you.*

He smiles at her across the room, and El is finally sure that Jane was never a choice at all.

Author's Note:

i hope you guys enjoyed. any questions or comments would be wonderful! thanks for reading, everyone!

find me on tumblr, my main is [@fivehargreeves](#) and my writing blog is [@lowriting](#)!